



## Curious about Curiosity? Virtual consult helps fearful shelter puppy gain her happy ending

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### CASE STUDY INTRODUCTION

Emerald slowly stood and cautiously looked out of her crate across the deck and through the window at the strange human and dog looking back at her. Even though she was outside and they were inside, this was a bold move. She leaned towards the house without actually taking a step, ready to retreat at the slightest movement. Head low, eyes alert, muscles tensed, she tried to see what was going on without actually engaging her body. Yet, even though her body was poised to withdraw, her mind was not. It was busy gathering information. Emerald was in a state of an emotional approach-avoidance conflict. She “wanted to want to” but not enough to commit physically. She was, however, accomplishing her goal: assessing, ever so timidly, her new environment. Friend or foe? Stay or run?

Curiosity was beginning to take hold. It was beginning to work in the way nature had intended. It is an innate emotion designed to keep an animal safe. Curiosity is defined as “a need to discover ... the object of curiosity’s desire is *information*. Curiosity is all about learning what we do not yet know ... [it] can be a positive or a negative emotion.” Dogs, like humans, have a natural urge “to explore and gain information about the world around them” (Tania Lombrozo, 2017). The instinctive desire to discover and investigate provides the dog with information that can reduce or increase uncertainty in the dog’s environment. This gathering of information is critical for the dog’s physical survival and emotional wellbeing.

**“When assessing a dog with avoidance or fearful behavior, keep in mind the difference between shyness and fearfulness. Shyness (nature) is a heritable trait, generalized and chronic, whereas fearfulness (nurture) is learned, environmental, specific, and acute.”**

Emerald needed information to adequately assess her new environment; in order to do this, she would have to eventually move out of her safe place and out into the open, out onto the deck. This she could not do. This was impossible for her—for now. But, by gathering small bits of information and in small increments from her safe place, she could still rely on her innate curiosity to provide her with the necessary and essential information in which to make a critical decision. Flee? Fight? Hide? She had nothing to offer but a tense body and a fearful heart. She could not give emotionally or physically. She did not know that giving was even a possibility until she was adopted by Lynn; this she would have to learn, and that was going to take time.

### MASLOW’S HIERARCHY OF NEEDS

Abraham Maslow’s 1943 paper, “A Theory of Human Motivation,” outlined a hierarchy that humans need in order to self actualize, i.e., reach their fullest potential. Even though Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (physiological, safety, love/belonging, esteem and self-actualization) was developed in regard to human motivation, you can easily see where it could apply as a formula in assessing and rehabilitating a fearful, shy, or under-socialized dog. A dog that feels safe and secure will choose approach behaviors over avoidance.

Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs can be of benefit in assessing a dog’s overall emotional and physical state. Each stage must be met and satisfied before the next stage can be realized. First, one must start with the most basic physical needs: food, water, shelter, warmth, and rest. After that, safety and security needs can be addressed, which include emotional as well as physical security. Only after those needs are met can relationships and feelings of belonging be a priority in the human-canine bond.

### CURIOSITY IS A SIGN OF PHYSICAL AND EMOTIONAL HEALTH

Emerald had been provided a safe place with food and shelter, but something scary came along with that: a human. What was she to do? How was she going to cope? This new situation was too much for her. It was just safer and less stressful to stay in her crate. After all, it was filled with warm blankets, and the food and water bowl were close. She did not have to venture out into the unknown to eat, and there was no telling when that scary human would show up. No, it was best to stay put.

Until . . . curiosity took over. A curious dog is one that is social and relaxed, exploring and feeling safe physically and emotionally.

*Curiosity in a dog is a sign of social health and well-being . . . Dogs are born social, but social confidence can be destroyed if they feel overwhelmed and put under pressure where they feel their general safety is jeopardized. When dogs feel they are under constant pressure from the environment, they become more alert and responsive to what is going on around them and less curious about investigating what surrounds them. It takes a lot of energy to be scanning all the time . . . Once stress is produced in the adrenal glands and is activated regularly, more stress hormones are produced when needed, hence the heightened reactions of being over aroused, afraid, restless . . . (“Why Curiosity is a Sign of Health in Your Dog,” 2019)*

Heightened arousal takes a tremendous amount of emotional and physical energy and leaves little room for healthy exploration.

*They are also preoccupied and highly reactive to movement in the environment that they don’t have the time or concentration to be curious. They are busy staying safe by staying on the alert. That is very tiring work for a dog. (“Why Curiosity is a Sign of Health in Your Dog,” 2019)*

If reactive behavior is decreasing and curious behaviors are increasing, then this is indicative of the dog gaining confidence and emotional equilibrium.

To encourage curiosity, remember the five E’s:

- Explore
- Examine
- Encounter
- Experience
- Enrichment

The easiest way to do this is to allow for one “smell-the-roses” walk a day, preferably in a different environment. Leave your watch and cell phone at home. These are good for both the handler, the dog, as well as their relationship.

**EMERALD'S HISTORY**

Emerald is a one-year-old medium-sized brown and white female mix. She was among a litter of puppies that had been surrendered to the local shelter because their mother had been killed by a car. They were about 11 months old when they were surrendered, and it was about six weeks before she was adopted. The shelter described her as shy, extremely withdrawn, and fearful of humans. Lynn named her Emerald because, "I wanted her to be a jewel of a dog and was valued." This name would help Lynn "not lose sight of what I was trying to accomplish; it helped me keep my mind set."

Lynn quickly discovered that Emerald liked to go on walks but very much on her own terms. She would stop if pulled, would refuse to walk through doorways, and only would walk on a retractable leash. The first hurdle she encountered was her inability to get Emerald out of the crate. This, along with the difficulty to get close enough to put on Emerald's leash, was an ongoing conflict for both dog and pet parent. But, once out and walking with the other family dog Augie, though skittish, Emerald seemed to enjoy some positive relief from her self-imposed exile to the crate. She also seemed to gain some confidence walking next to Augie, and they bonded fairly quickly. Although Emerald was making progress with Augie, there still remained the issue that she was avoiding Lynn. Emerald would not eat in Lynn's presence, and her default behavior was always to retreat if Lynn came onto the deck.

**PROTOCOL**

"GOAL: To follow Emerald's schedule, NOT ours. Predictability, creating distance, not "asking" and rewarding any approaching behaviors were the cornerstone of the daily rehabilitation protocol.

1. We accepted that Emerald was more comfortable outside and made sure she had a warm and dry place. Her safe place of choice was on the deck and was as far away from the entry of the deck as possible.
2. The food and water bowls were kept close to her crate so she would not have to wander far. Over time, Lynn slowly, in small increments, moved them farther away.
3. Lynn was to leave the deck during feeding time as Emerald would not approach the food bowl if Lynn was anywhere on the deck.
4. Emerald was put on a routine. Her day became predictable, and Lynn's interactions were distant, short, and consistent.
5. Lynn did not approach unless Emerald did so first.
6. Lynn would go out on a schedule and sit at the opposite end of the deck from Emerald's crate; she would not encourage, coo, plead, bribe, or make any other request for contact.
7. She was just to go and sit. She would position herself as far away from Emerald's safe place as possible.
8. She would ask nothing of Emerald but follow her lead.
9. Lynn was not to make contact but to find something of interest to do, ignoring Emerald. Lynn could read, check email, any neutral non-engaging activity.

10. Lynn was to reduce eye contact.

11. As long as Emerald was below threshold, Lynn could gradually increase the time spent on the deck.

12. One goal was to include Augie; she was to let him freely interact with Emerald.

13. Lynn could drop chicken tidbits outside the crate, increasing the distance from the crate out onto the deck.

14. When she felt Emerald was gaining in confidence, she could play the "treat and retreat" game or simply just toss treats as she read her book and checked her emails.

15. Lynn was to reward any approaching behaviors with chicken.

16. Emerald was provided a Kong spread with peanut butter or soft cheese; as Lynn said, "it became her pacifier."

17. Lynn was encouraged to keep a journal of any signs of Emerald's approaching behaviors or interaction with either her or Augie. This became very beneficial, because this was such a slow process it was encouraging to look back and see that they were actually making progress.

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When Emerald arrived with Lynn, she spent her first few weeks hiding in the crate, not venturing out except to eat (but only when no one was there) with little contact or approaching behavior. If Lynn went outside, Emerald would retreat into her crate. At a loss, Lynn called for help. After telling me this sad tale, she asked, "what do I do?" The answer was—nothing, do absolutely nothing. However difficult that may be, doing nothing is the best course of action for a dog in this emotional state. An extremely fearful dog runs the risk of shutting down if pressured, pushed, or stressed. Emerald was physically healthy, and her physical needs were being taken care of. It was her emotional state that needed tender loving care, and to do that meant to back off any expectations, schedules, goals, or plans "to help."

Let's analyze this. If you think about it, a lot was already being accomplished.

1. Emerald was living in a new environment.
2. She was living in an environment where there was a human and another dog—both strangers, both unknown.
3. Emerald had never lived among humans in a domestic setting. Even though she was outside, it still required learning how to live within the human's rules and expectations. For example, where is the appropriate place to go to the bathroom?
4. It was hard for Lynn; she wanted Emerald inside where it was warm and dry and out of the elements. But Emerald needed time to feel safe, decompress, and learn the ropes, and for now that was outside on the deck; this was Emerald's preference.

5. By honoring Emerald's choice to remain outside and not asking or requiring anything of her, Lynn was providing her with her safe place to decompress and to feel safe. Only then could curiosity start Emerald on a journey of recovery.

6. Decompression and approaching would take place on Emerald's time frame, not Lynn's.

This protocol went on for months. To Lynn's credit, she followed the plan. She did not ask but followed Emerald's lead. Lynn was instructed to observe Emerald's base rate behaviors; any change would tell Lynn when Emerald was ready to leave her safe place and engage in her new world. Slowly, curiosity got the best of Emerald; she was curious about the other family dog. We encouraged increased visits out on the deck with Augie. The family dog seemed to give her confidence with her tentative interactions with Lynn. Augie became her therapist and mediator with Lynn.

**HAPPY ENDINGS**

In a recent visit with Lynn, she stated that, "the sense I have at this point is that her curiosity is starting to overcome her fear." After many months of patience, one of the first break throughs came when Emerald became curious about the treats Lynn was giving Augie. One day, Emerald quietly went over to explore what was in Lynn's hand. What was Augie eating? She took the treat then retreated, but she had approached, explored, and taken the treat. Another example of curiosity taking over her fear was if Augie was in the house Emerald would go to the back door, stand on her hind legs, and look in. Curiosity was beginning to influence and motivate her in her decisions about exploring her environment.

In order to follow the protocol, Lynn had to learn more about canine communication in general and Emerald's communication specifically. "I guess the good news for today is that I am getting better at reading her body language and encouraging her when she's feeling more confident and backing off when she's stressed."

Because it is not unusual for a dog who avoids humans be receptive to other dogs, Augie became an invaluable therapist in Emerald's rehabilitation. Lynn says, "Augie and I continue to spend time out on the deck with her. Some days she's clearly curious, while others she is more withdrawn. Augie has taken to walking over to her crate, putting his head in the door, and wagging his tail. He's a great therapy dog, very patient with her."

Lynn is now able to garden while the dogs curl up together under the shade tree or go on walks off leash where they play, run, and explore their world. There were times when Lynn was discouraged, but "it was one of the best things I ever did . . . there is hope for others who adopt these dogs; they can be helped." It took many months of patience, love, diligence, and dedication but eventually, ever so slowly, Emerald emerged from her fearful world into one of curiosity, exploration, and engagement.

**SUMMARY**

Curiosity is crucial for survival, in assessing flight or fight (Kayla Costanzo, 2018). Curiosity triggers exploratory and seeking behaviors and motivates an innate need for discovery. This gathering of information enables the dog to decide about what is going on in his environment. Curiosity or lack thereof can be a tool in assessing the dog's current physical and emotional health. It can be easily observed and charted.

Critical to this decision-making process is the dog's acute ability to smell and to hear; these are paramount in the dog's survival (Costanzo, 2018). These senses enable the dog to distinguish between potential threats and to react quickly. Should the dog avoid, or should he approach? His senses dominate his initial assessment. However, once it is determined that there is no threat, then the dog's innate exploratory behavior will take over. A dog who is curious is a dog feeling safe and confident enough to explore the world!



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